

# The Oresteia in the Making

Tony Harrison

The best part of ten years passed between the day that Peter Hall persuaded the poet Tony Harrison to collaborate on a new version of the *Oresteia* and the first night at the National Theatre on 28th November 1981. During those years poet and director corresponded at length, and Tony Harrison has generously let Omnibus rummage about in this voluminous correspondence. These snippets give us a sly glimpse into the remaking of Aeschylus' great drama (© Tony Harrison, 1982).

**22 December 1975**

Dear Peter,

Doldrums. I'm a bit stuck with the *Oresteia* so far, though I now know how *not* to do it. I'm still waiting for take-off . . . The venture seems to me much more a 'dramaturgical collaborative' than any conventional sequence of script, production, design etc. I'm plodding through the Greek and the commentaries for clues, and almost all the other versions. None of these seem even remotely actable except in the flimsiest fragments . . . Most of the versions have a decent shot at some of the set speeches, but none of them even begin to approach the chorus and that I take it is the whole problem. Solve that and the speeches can take care of themselves as far as I'm concerned . . .

My own feeling is that the 'poetry' resides in the onward sweep, the inner momentum, the arc of the whole. Reading the versions of the *Oresteia* I can't imagine any of them giving the sort of momentum the play seems to need . . .

I asked about 'movement' before only because until I know how they are going to move I'm not sure how they are going to speak. Plutarch speaks of the meaning of the words being like the strings which created movement in the chorus, and even minimal arm movements qualified for the word dance in Greek, perhaps it was all more like Mao's keep fit classes than the Royal Ballet! I have the same wariness of 'movement' as I have of 'choral speaking'. But, for example the Parodos, the entry of the chorus was done apparently marching in quasi-military fashion, though it might well look like Dad's army being all old men . . . the parodos in *Agamemnon* was marching, and the rhythm was a marching one. Do we want that? Every step, you see, is a committee decision. I have a rhythm for the first entry which is a bit Hiawatha and only need be so if we are attempting to be archaeological. I don't see why we should myself, but I have a march rhythm up my sleeve if you want it, Hiawatha, not Colonel Bogey:

*10 years now since Menelaus  
with his brother Agamemnon*

*both the joint true heirs of Atreus,  
to revenge themselves on Paris  
for his ravishing of Helen,  
launched the Argive expedition  
of a 1000 warships strong.  
battalions of retribution  
sent from Argos to smash Troy.*

**18th February 1976**

Dear Peter,

I'm only crying mush-mush sotto voce to the huskies at the moment as I have the horrible feeling that at the pole I'll find another flag already flapping. This after reading reviews of a new version of *Oresteia* by Prof. Robert Fagles. A triumph says Mr. Levin . . . the wind is out of my sails. I'm stuck at Aulis until I've read Fagles. Would you also cast your eye over it just to make sure. My own theory, more and more, though obviously Utopian, is that each production of a foreign classic needs its own version but . . .

**30th March 1976**

Dear Peter,

NECESSITY he bows to it neck into the yokestrap  
half wishing FAGLES had done it all first.

Yes, then, the whole tri-(or tetra-)logy at one go, with the proviso that I shall need intensive help from actors, yourself and HB (*Harrison Birtwistle, the composer*) at various stages . . . I'll aim for a rough complete draft of *Agamemnon* for this year for further trials to put me on the right road for the whole. My chief preoccupation of the moment is how to vary the discourse of the chorus, and that should probably be the next thing we consider as a team. As a rough example (very rough) what would you make of a sudden common ballad, single voice song emerging from the choral counterpoint? At random from my notebooks I find this to illustrate: First we have:

*He's haunted by dream wives succubae ghosts  
They bring joy a moment then vanish away  
He tries to grasp her she slips through his fingers  
shadowing off down the flyways of sleep*

Then we have a single voice emerge enacting the same basic dichotomy between the substantial, sizeable nature of the thing person loved and what it can be turned into. So a rough ballad might go . . .

*goldshark Ares god of War  
broker of men's bodies  
usurer of living flesh  
corpse-trafficker that god is –*

*give to War your men's fleshgold  
and what are your returns?  
kilos of cold clinker packed  
in army issue urns.*

Then back into the multiple voice chorus. I don't know if you see any future in that kind of transition. I'm going to let moments like that emerge and have them up my sleeve for our next sessions. . .

You will notice in the fragment before the ballad that I am using such words as 'the flyways of sleep' or 'griefstrings'. These are not necessarily the same coinage as the Greek but I have accepted the Aeschylean modes of image making and neologising to use *wherever* they occur to me or seem effective in English, so that I extract a certain stylistic principle and allow it to be distributed over the version.

**19 Jan 1977**

. . . The speech on p.27 CLYTEMNESTA'S 'The sea's there always' which is shifted to and fro by scholars *now* seems to me to be spoken as AGAMEMNON walks on the red cloth. It is daring the audience to shout out STOP or LOOK OUT/DON'T DO IT but stunning them into silence and acquiescence by the power of the *performance*, and the rhetoric, those rather too many images mesmerise the audience to the point of admiring even her villainy and audacity. Then they say CHRIST! (or Dionysus!) look what we've let her do . . .

**18 July 1979**

Dear Peter,

I thought I should let you have this as soon as poss. It's the 1st draft of the 2nd (?) draft of the (CHOEPHORI a prize for the best new title). In the end I just went back to the Greek, so there is little in common between this and the last version. I think it's much clearer and much quicker. All very formal, taking as metrical modes the echoes of the English heroic period without being in the reproduction furniture or restoration drama business, I mean the alliteration, sometimes heavy to get it established sometimes barely there, and the ballad metre . . .

You will also see that I have gone all out on the 'stichomythia' and made those exchanges rhymed and formal, though not hieratic, but popular formal. With all the images from the wrestling ring in the play there is often a sense of these dialogues like that inner ring where

characters grapple towards a crucial moment of the drama. To me it reads better as it is now rather than the sudden slump into naturalistic dialogue which never works. This way it becomes a change of gear which moves *up*, not a lull between movement . . .

**20 August 1979**

Dear Peter,

Herewith 2nd instalment of the everyday story of Argive folk. It's better than before. I see more structure in it but it could be a lot better. The ending is a yawn but I can't imagine it except visually yet. I think it is really a big musical number and once we know how the Furies sing I can crack it. I still hear the voices of the Furies as ranging from baby voices to crones, the seven ages of women, with abrupt transitions between them, so perhaps if you allow that jerky ensemble feeling to counterpoint the relentless metric it will seem like a start at least . . .

The *Agamemnon* doesn't need the same metrical overhaul as the others but the dialogues need rewriting to remove all shreds of the naturalistic and the choruses need formalising. I have the instinct that the more formal and even repetitive the rhythms are the more variety the ingenious Birtwistle can pace them with . . .

**13 September 1981**

My dear Peter,

I thought I'd put down a few thoughts so that I won't have forgotten them by next Thursday, since we don't have time outside actual rehearsals to talk about the work.

I was excited by what is happening to the 'stichomythia'. I always felt that they were the key to the style and what began to happen with what you did the other morning was the first time I began to feel my choice of extreme formality was absolutely right. We must never in the whole piece be let off the rhythmical hook, *never*. There should be none of those descents into the bathos of naturalism like after a number in a musical when the dialogue starts agin. . .

We don't want Barnsley Working Men's on a Saturday night knees up but I have written SHORT vowels. It matters because unless the vowels stay short the consonants don't register and the most important thing, and one of the reasons I first began to stress these facts, and it is by no means about Northern chauvinism, is that the resonance of protracted vowels disturbs the mask. It begins to vibrate and slur. The plosion etc. of consonants sounds clear through the masks as long as the vowels aren't lingered over . . . If emotion is a river in spate then my consonants are the stepping stones over it. It's not the percussiveness of consonants but their sensuality, their sexuality if you like. Vowels are spirit, consonants body, people say. Then I'm for bodies . . .

**SUNDAY morning 20th September 1981**

My dear Peter,

This letter might well be very chaotic as my mind is racing with impressions, reactions, suggestions, feeling for patterns. I'm convinced that the *leitmotiv* notion which Wagner is said to have come upon through his reading of the *Oresteia* is one we can press further I mean musically, poetically, spatially, visually, so that we are hooked by eye, ear, and mind at the same time. It was this feeling that made me feel certain that AEGISTHUS must not be on stage until he is invited up by Clytemnestra and up the same 'red path' as Agamemnon and at the very end of the play. . . It also unites the cowardice of AEG. with the helplessness of the chorus if the taunts take him *formal* step by step (and backwards so he is addressing them and we don't lose his mask) up to join CLYT only at the end. Then as they go into the palace following the truck we have already a sense of trailered doom about the ending, and that's how it should end. The space is *there* in the writing and the stichomythia. . .

Am I making sense? Poets have an obsessive naturally inbuilt sense of leitmotiv like composers and when you run a play they become clear *textually* . . .

His (*Aeschylus*') brilliance as a maker of patterns is staggering and I don't think we have found a half of them. When we do we'll have cracked it . . .

One last observation: the question of the dominance of women by men goes beyond the polarisation of left and right, but is potentially more heated than that issue. I have only to remember some of the conversations about the *Oresteia* I've had. My own feeling is that the feminist movement is the next thing to make us reassess our lives and societies. Our futures depend on it. When we first met I was excited by what you'd said about wanting to do Greek plays because it showed a society truly debating with itself. The image of the final play is also debate, the god who is said to preside is Zeus of Debates, Zeus of the Agora. The debate has to go into the auditorium as our final procession will . . .

I think apart from this issue the next real problem is converting their now sure sense of the play's rhythms into something stronger and more subtle. It is all on one key, too loud, too much volume. Volume is like the steam escaping from the cooker when it should be *inside* cooking the food . . .

My freedom thus consists in my moving about within the narrow frame that I have assigned myself for each one of my undertakings. I shall go even further: my freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. *Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength*. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit . . .

Regular rhythm, form in poetry is like the mask it enables you to go beyond the scream as a reaction to events that in the normal course of life would make you do just that. Our century is very much in need of it. This is the area, these are the grounds on which we should justify our choices. All you have to do though is part the lines or remove the mask and you have the scream right there, behind the door of the metal mask of the palace. If we only talk about theatrical styles it leaves us open to charges of formalism. And it's why we can't just have the product 'packaged'. Whereas packaging enlarges or aggrandises soap and toothpaste it only ever *reduces* something as big as the *Oresteia*. I think Aeschylus is far bolder than any of us, and our brand of historical provincialism is that we think we are so much more permissively outspoken. The true direction of the mask is through areas of fire and blood we can scarcely bear. The mask keeps its eyes wide open when the axeblade falls, when the babies burn, when the city comes crashing into ash, when the bombs drop, when the world ends . . . I've gone on too long. Sorry. See you next week.

*Tony Harrison studied Classics at school and University in Leeds before determining to earn his living as a poet. His latest volume of poems Continuous was published in 1981. As well as the Oresteia he has translated Moliere's Misanthrope and Racine's Phedre for the National Theatre. But his first translation of a play was a version of Aristophanes' Lysistrata for performance in Nigeria: it was called Aikin Mata which means Boss Woman. He is now working on the libretto of an opera about Medea.*